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RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000130

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/FO, SCA/INSB, SCA/PPD, R, OES
DEPT PLS PASS TO PEACE CORPS AND USAID

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TAGS: PREL OVIP SOCI SCUL EAID EAGR BG

SUBJECT: BANGLADESH PM ASKS U/S MCHALE FOR MORE
PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE DIALOGUE, EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told visiting Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale that she welcomed increased U.S. Government educational programs in Bangladesh, including the return of the Peace Corps. The Prime Minister also requested U.S. support for her government's efforts to provide broader educational opportunities to students in madrassas. Hasina praised President Obama's role in the Copenhagen Summit and expressed her desire to work with India and China for a lasting agreement on climate change. She also repeated her invitation to President Obama and Secretary Clinton to visit Bangladesh.

BRING BACK THE PEACE CORPS, INCREASE EXCHANGES

12. (C) The Prime Minister told Under Secretary McHale and the Ambassador during a February 7 meeting that she supported increased exchange programs between the United States and Bangladesh. Under Secretary McHale emphasized the importance of people-to-people dialogue and said she wanted to encourage more Bangladeshi students to study in the U.S. The Prime Minister turned the conversation to the proposed return of the Peace Corps to Bangladesh. The PM spoke highly of the program's impact during her 1996-2001 administration and offered support for reinstating the program. (NOTE: The Peace Corps left Bangladesh in 2005 due to since-resolved security concerns; the agency is mulling a return to Bangladesh. END NOTE.)

GOB LOOKS OUTWARD, DESPITE CRITICISM

13. (C) Recalling Bangladesh's decision to ascribe to the Copenhagen Accord, the Prime Minister warmly praised President Obama's role during the Summit. She noted the President asked her to emphasize the importance of a lasting agreement with the governments of India and China, which she said she began during her trip to India last month. The PM expressed a desire to visit China soon and to continue the dialogue, saying, "It is my duty for my country and other countries, on humanitarian grounds." Under Secretary McHale thanked the Prime Minister for her leadership on this issue.

INVITATION TO THE PRESIDENT, SECRETARY TO VISIT BANGLADESH

14. (C) The Prime Minister extended warm invitations to President Obama and Secretary Clinton to visit Bangladesh. She mentioned President Obama's planned visit to Indonesia in March and urged that he add Bangladesh to his trip, saying, "He should not forget Bangladesh."

PURSUING BANGLADESH INTERESTS WITH INDIA

15. (C) The Prime Minister laughingly acknowledged the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) criticism that she "sold out" the country to India during her recent summit with Indian PM Manmohan Singh, stating, "I am waiting for them to come to Parliament -- then we will talk." The Prime Minister said she undertook her trip to the neighboring giant with the goal of furthering economic development in Bangladesh. Under Secretary McHale encouraged the Prime Minister to seek opportunities for regional cooperation. Hasina agreed and pointed to a regional business summit she hosted during her prior administration and her role in diffusing tensions between India and Pakistan after India's nuclear test in 1998.

DEVELOPING BANGLADESH'S FUTURE

16. (C) The Prime Minister briefly touched on a number of development needs -- improved infrastructure, a social safety net, and healthcare -- before focusing on food security. Under Secretary McHale stated that this was an area in which the U.S. wanted to work with Bangladesh. The Prime Minister

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expressed hope for global cooperation during the current food crisis, explaining what she perceived as a worldwide shift in mindset when considering how to help least-developed countries combat food insecurity by increasing productivity. She advocated for thoughtful and effective food aid, saying, "We cannot just eat the money -- we need food."

EDUCATION KEY TO BANGLADESH'S DEVELOPMENT

17. (C) The Prime Minister raised the GOB's education policy, which seeks to enforce greater uniformity of standards among educational institutions, especially madrassas. She maintained that madrassa students needed better education -- especially in science, technology, vocational fields, and English language -- to give them economic opportunities and a broader outlook, the lack of which left them vulnerable to extremist ideology. She expressed a wish for U.S. support in providing such expanded training. Under Secretary McHale said she viewed broadening educational opportunities, including for women, as crucial to fostering progress and building a more stable society. The Prime Minister also said she believed education is the key to lasting change in Bangladesh's often-corrosive political culture. She welcomed news of Under Secretary McHale's planned visit to Dhaka University later that day.

COMMENT

18. (C) The PM highlighted U.S. and Bangladesh mutual interests during the meeting with U/S McHale, especially climate change, food security, and education. The Prime Minister's palpable enthusiasm for a return by the Peace Corps should move the process forward within the GOB. The Prime Minister is an ardent admirer of both President Obama and Secretary Clinton; a visit to Bangladesh would be an excellent opportunity to cement the progress we have made in the bilateral relationship and to emphasize messages of engagement with the Muslim world, strengthening democratic institutions, and encouraging Bangladesh to be a more responsible regional and international partner.

~~¶~~9. (SBU) Under Secretary HcHale cleared this message.
MORIARTY